ALL THE Right Moves

JOHN CEFALY JR. ‘70 IS A MASTER DEAL MAKER IN MANHATTAN REAL ESTATE

By Geoff Gehman

JOHN CEFALY JR. ‘70 PLAYS CHESS WITH MANHATTAN SKYSCRAPERS. THE BROKER SECURES HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF SQUARE FEET FOR SOME OF THE WORLD’S LARGEST ADVERTISING AGENCIES, INTERNATIONAL BANKS AND OTHER KING-SIZE CORPORATE KNIGHTS IN SHOWCASE BUILDINGS, SOME IN AREAS HE HELPED TRANSFORM INTO BUSINESS HUBS. HE PERFORMS THESE MOVES AS EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE GLOBAL FIRM CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD, INC., THE WORLD’S LARGEST PRIVATELY HELD COMMERCIAL REAL-ESTATE SERVICES COMPANY.
John Cefaly Jr. ’70 enjoys the view of the city he helped shape from his Avenue of the Americas office.

PHOTOS BY DAN Z. JOHNSON
“I like working with big clients with big needs and, hopefully, complicated structures,” says Cefaly, reclining in his Avenue of the Americas office, a block from two landmarks, Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center. “The business is interesting when you put a deal together with two parties. But it’s fascinating when the deal is with three parties, or more.”

Cefaly grew up near the Wilkes campus in Ashley, Pa. He had little interest in brokering commercial space while studying at Wilkes, although he did enjoy George Bell’s real estate course. Cefaly discovered Cushman & Wakefield through his friend Caleb McKenzie ’70, whose brothers worked for the firm. Hired by a McKenzie sibling in February 1971, Cefaly’s first job was finding tenants for a year-old building in lower Manhattan in an area known as the insurance district. It was a tough sell because New York City was mired in a real estate recession. Cefaly’s task became easier in 1973 as the market rebounded and New York emerged from the recession. The opening of the World Trade Center also began to make lower Manhattan a new commercial hotspot.

Cefaly was mentored by Ken Dean, nicknamed “Mr. Downtown” for popularizing lower Manhattan. For 25 years, mentor and protégé shared a Wall Street office, sitting literally desk to desk. Dean convinced Cefaly in 1974 to stay in Manhattan and not relocate to Houston, Texas, where Cushman & Wakefield was opening a new branch office—“the best decision I ever made in my life.” And it was Dean who gave Cefaly rare access to CEOs, CFOs and other captains of industry. “That was pretty eye opening for a kid from Ashley, Pa.”

“Ken was from an old New York family with deep roots in lower-Manhattan real estate. He was a first-class gentleman and very important in my career at Cushman & Wakefield.”

Cefaly has accumulated a large crop of creative coups. In the late 1980s, he moved the ad agency Bates Worldwide from the Chrysler Building to the Garment District on Seventh Avenue, a move that helped change the area from commercially unfashionable to fashionable. Since 2000, he advised the Canadian Imperial Banking Corp. (CIBC) on a 1.1 million-square-foot joint venture to construct a new building on 42nd Street and Madison Avenue. Shortly after 9/11 he represented the Dutch bank ABN AMRO in relocating from its New York home to waterfront property in New Jersey and then re-let their space to the insurance brokerage giant Aon, previously located in the World Trade Center. In that transaction, Aon secured all the leasehold improvements including furniture and artwork from ABN AMRO.

Last summer Cefaly completed one of the biggest deals of the year for Nomura Holding America Inc., the U.S. branch of a Japanese financial-services company. Cefaly worked with Nomura executives to analyze their options of remaining downtown or relocating to midtown. They ended up focusing on Worldwide Plaza at Eighth Avenue and 50th Street. During negotiations, a number of other tenants sought to secure the building. Due to relationships he forged over his 40-year career, Cefaly convinced the Worldwide Plaza owners to stick with Nomura. “Don’t go looking,” he said, “at the other girl across the street.”

Nomura ended up renting 900,000 square feet in Worldwide Plaza on 20 floors. It was the largest new office lease in midtown in seven years. The Wall Street Journal chronicled the deal as one of five major 2011 transactions for Cefaly’s team totaling $1.3 billion.

Cefaly’s success can be measured by the nearly 40 million square feet he’s secured and by his longtime rank as one of C&W’s top worldwide producers. He has adjusted to a host of crises: the Black Friday stock-market crash of 1988 and the subprime-mortgage catastrophe in 2008. Most traumatic was the Sept. 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center’s twin towers by terrorists. Cefaly, who lost friends in the disaster, worked tirelessly with his team to help clients find alternative spaces and assist in getting their businesses up and running.

Cefaly and his wife, Jane, who also has ties to Wilkes, reside in Manhattan, but also spend time in homes in Palm Beach, Fla., and Westhampton, N.Y. He belongs to clubs in the New York area and enjoys golfing around the world, making an annual trip to play the fabled course at St. Andrew’s in Scotland. He’s an investor in two restaurants in Manhattan: Il Gattopardo (The Leopard), which survived weeks of gloomy business after
opening a week after 9/11, and The Leopard at Des Artistes, which reopened in the former Café des Artistes, a legendary lair near Lincoln Center.

Now in his 41st year at C&W, Cefaly still relishes the friendship of his partners, inside and outside the firm. He still enjoys auditioning for jobs—and he still gets a major jolt from closing a major package.

“Every deal is very satisfying when you’ve taken it from beginning to end, and you’ve negotiated through the maze of structural and legal complexities, and you’re there for the ribbon cutting, so to speak,” says Cefaly with a smile. “Even after 41 years, I still feel the same enthusiasm for executing, and winning, the business. It’s just great when you get checkmate.”

JOHN CEFALY JR., New York, N.Y.
B.S., Commerce and Finance, Wilkes, 1970

Career: Vice chairman, Cushman & Wakefield, world’s largest privately held commercial real-estate services company; member of its global management committee; founding chairman of its National Brokerage Advisory Board

Notable: Cushman & Wakefield’s Worldwide Overall Producer in 2002-2003 and 2005

Continuing contribution to Wilkes: Co-chairman of fundraising campaign for the University’s new science center. Accepted the task to honor Cromwell Thomas, former longtime head of Wilkes’ engineering department and uncle of his wife, Jane. The campaign kicks off in March 2012. (See story, page 10)